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ABSTRACT

This presentation explores international trends and needed changes in the education of persons with severe intellectual disabilities. One goal is to have all children attend school, no matter how severe their disabilities. Though low percentages of disabled children from developing countries attend school, some positive trends are identified, such as implementing educational legislation and placing responsibility for the education of all disabled children with education ministries. As developing countries plan educational services for disabled children, the benefits of mainstreaming must be weighed against the reality of overcrowded schools, inadequately trained teachers, and a curriculum that is not easily individualized. A responsible integration policy that results in real mainstreaming rather than "maindumping" would require support from teachers, specialists, the disabled child's family, other children, and the community. Another goal of special education for people with intellectual disabilities involves helping them to learn and to take advantage of opportunities for life-long continuing education. (JDD)

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INTERNATIONAL TRENDS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION OF PERSONS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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INTERNATIONAL TRENDS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION OF PERSONS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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With the end of the century only 12 years away, it is time to look to the future, and to ask what changes would we like to see and are prepared to fight for in the next half century for all disabled children but particularly for those with severe intellectual disabilities?

First, we would expect that all children will attend schools, no matter how severe their disabilities. This goal does not seem so far off to those who live in countries in which education is compulsory for all children. UNICEF estimated that of the 140 million disabled children in the world, 120 million live in developing countries - 88 million in Asia, 18 million in Africa, 13 million in Latin America, 11 million in Europe and a mere 6 million in North America. In the 20 year period between 1980 and 2000, the total number of disabled children and adults of all ages is likely to rise from 400 to 600 million. Rough estimates from UNESCO and other international agencies suggest that less than one per cent of disabled children in Eastern and Southern Africa are going to school.

Despite these stark contrasts of scale, some positive trends can be found. A recent UNESCO survey showed that in 48 out of 58 countries responsibility for the education of all disabled children now lies with Education Ministries both at national and state levels, rather than with health or social welfare authorities, or with no one at all, as in the past (UNESCO 1988). But school attendance was not always either possible for families or enforced by the authorities. Secondly, an increasing number of countries have passed legislation specifically concerned with the admission of disabled children to schools. Thirdly, there is growing evidence of a commitment to educate children with disabilities in ordinary schools.

These developments should be seen as part of a world wide movement in the direction of greater emphasis on primary health care and community based rehabilitation. Community based rehabilitation builds on the basic training of local health workers in order to help families and local communities support and assist children and adults with disabilities to learn skills which are essential to independence and survival in the community. David Werner's masterly manual *Disabled Village Children,* (Werner, 1987) is likely to become highly influential.

SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN: THE CHALLENGE OF INTEGRATION

It has been said that what children need is not integration but education. Integration is now the central issue of special education and indeed of education itself. Furthermore, the integration of children with intellectual disabilties represents perhaps the most difficult educational challenge of all, given the disabilties of the children and the attitudes and expectations of adults.

Developing countries wishing to plan educational facilities for disabled children therefore face a difficult dilemma. Some experts advise them not to repeat the mistakes of the West by building special schools; they tell them they have a golden opportunity to start with integration in the first place. On the other hand, the ordinary schools in most of these countries are hopelessly overcrowded, the teachers are not adequately trained and the curriculum is centrally prescribed and does not lend itself to indidividualisation.

Priority in most countries goes to children with visual, hearing and physical impairments; children with intellectual impairments are nearly always the last to be considered either by governments or schools. Many special schools claiming to provide for 'mentally handicapped children' in fact admit only those with mild or moderate levels of intellectual disability and only then if they are toilet trained and have no major behaviour problems. Those with severe and above all profound and multiple disabilities are the most frequently excluded, even in some countries with advanced systems of education or special education.

STEPS TO RESPONSIBLE INTEGRATION

In our zeal to open ordinary schools to disabled children, we should not assume that special education necessarily means a either a poor quality education or even a segregated education. Closing special schools and simply placing children in ordinary schools is not integration or mainstreaming; it is maindumping.

A responsible integration policy would seek to ensure that every intellectually disabled child attended either their nearest neighbourhood school or at least a specially chosen ordinary school with additional staffing and resources and a staff with proven commitment to meeting the needs of all children. A study of the literature suggests that successful integration is certainly possible (Hegarty, 1987; Mittler and Farrell, 1987). The ingredients of success can be summarised in one word - *support.*

Support is needed for the children to ensure that they can participate in the learning activities of the classroom and the social activities in the playground and in the neighbourhood. Support is needed by teachers in the ordinary school from specialists with experience of children with special needs in general and those with intellectual disabilities in particular. These support teachers can work with the class teacher to assess what the child can already do and decide

jointly with the parents about priorities for teaching, about methods and techniques which may help the child to learn without segregation from other children. Support from other children is another prerequisite of success. The view that "children are cruel" is not borne out by research. Children are supportive of those who have obvious difficulties; they tend to mock those who are most like themselves. Children have been encouraged to help those with difficulties.

Support from the community is also essential. Sometimes, a parent or relative will not only accompany the child but stay in the classroom and act as an assistant to the teacher - not just with the child who is disabled but with the class as a whole.

Support from and to the child's family is vital. If the family and the school are both committed to the child attending the local school, successful integration is much more likely.

Full integration in the ordinary classroom will not be practical or in the interests of all children with intellectual disabities. However, it is quite possible to create one or more special classes for such children in a small number of carefully selected ordinary schools. Such a plan involves the transfer into these ordinary schools of two or three whole classes of children, together with their teachers and teaching assistants and a guarantee of a high level of support from both teachers and therapists. Such classes can provide a starting point for a step by step plan for individual integration into the ordinary class.

AFTER SCHOOL, WHAT?

In Western countries we are used to thinking about young people leaving school at around 16. An increasing proportion of young people continue in full time education until they are in their early 20s or beyond. But even in the West, most young people with intellectual disabilties leave school at around 16, although this is the very time when many of them are just beginning to show a real interest in learning and to make progress in mastering basic educational skills. This is not surprising, since the level of intellectual maturity of many school leavers corresponds in some respects to that of a non-handicapped child of five or six.

People with intellectual disabilties need to be helped to learn and to take advantage of opportunities for life long continuing education for the whole of their lives, if that is what they would wish. Here again, they should not be segregated from other adults but should be helped to participate in community educational projects. These may be in community centres or colleges, in adult education institutes, in pre-vocational or vocational training, in any setting in which people meet together to develop their knowledge and skills. This is the giant task that confronts us in the decades to come.

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